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Tucson No. 1 in EPA pollution-reduction plan

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Employer-backed programs encouraging the use of alternative transportation reduced pollution by 2.5 million pounds and eliminated more than 85 million travels last year.

Those numbers, and others, were enough to drive Tucson to the top of a federal Environmental Protection Agency program involving employers who help cities plan to reduce the number of vehicle trips daily to and from work.

"We are number one in the EPA's program for best workplaces for commuters," said Rita Hildebrand, coordinator of the Travel Reduction Program overseen by the Pima Association of Governments.

That includes only cities participating in the EPA travel reduction program. The agency calculates the percentage of commuters in cities who work for employers who strongly participate in the EPA program.

With 10 percent of area employers participating in the EPA program, Tucson just edged out Atlanta at 9.6 percent, she said.

More than 112,000 workers at 277 workplaces in the Tucson area participated in the program last year.

The benefits are clear: Cleaner air and fewer pollution-related respiratory ailments, less gasoline wasted, fewer vehicles on the roads and lots less stress to participants freed from the steering wheel in peak-hour drive times.

"The home-to-work trip is the one that most people make most frequently," Hildebrand said.

"As our population grows, these employers and their employees are doing their fair share to reduce the impacts of growth."

It isn't exactly voluntary, however.

The program began in 1989, after area jurisdictions agreed to approve ordinances requiring employers to work with PAG to establish programs at their workplaces.

But it has not been like pulling teeth. Most major area employers with 100 or more employees have readily agreed to participate in the program, as required by the ordinances approved by all metropolitan area governments, Hildebrand said.

Participation by companies with fewer than 100 workers is not mandatory, but is encouraged on a voluntary basis, she said.

The necessity for some kind of mandatory alternative trip program by major area employers became apparent in the mid-1980s when the Tucson metropolitan area was annually declared as out of compliance with federal Environmental Protection Agency standards for carbon monoxide pollution.

Noncompliance did not merely mean dirty air; it represented potential sanctions by the federal agency against the government jurisdictions where air- quality standards were being violated, Hildebrand said.

Employers can seek variances to the ordinance requirements from a Travel Reduction Task Force appointed for such a purpose. The ordinances are enforced.

For example, Pima County's version of the ordinance sets a $250 a day fine if they refuse to participate in the program.

Every one of the 250 area program participants are required to conduct a short employee survey to increase the percentage of participation annually.

The program benefits employees, especially those who have to scrape to keep a personal motor vehicle running reliably, safely and filled with expensive fuel, Hildebrand noted.

IMPACTS

- Miles saved: 86.5 million

- Gasoline saved: 4.3 million gallons

- Money saved: $32.4 million

- Pollution reduced: 2.5 million pounds

Source: Pima Association of Governments

VEHICLE MILES TRAVELLED AWARDS

The following companies were recognized for having the greatest percentage reduction in vehicle miles traveled based on last year's employee surveys:

From 100 to 199 employees:

Old Tucson Studios

Mountain View Care Center

The Home Depot on Oracle Road

From 200 to 299 employees

Jim Click at Automotive Mall

The Groundskeeper

Wal-Mart on Wetmore Road

From 500 to 999 employees

Tucson Newspapers

Afni

162 FW, Air National Guard

More than 1,000 employees

State of Arizona complex

Sunnyside School District

Pima Community College

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